Navigating Perspectives: Beyond Voluntourism in Community Development

Madison Cocker

Perspective is a broad, yet crucial concept in resolving productive conflicts. Among various definitions, the Oxford Dictionary describes perspective as "the art of representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface, thereby correctly conveying their height, width, depth, and relative positions." This definition, while initially pertaining to visual art, metaphorically applies to human interactions by highlighting the importance of understanding and appreciating the multifaceted nature of individual experiences and viewpoints.

Human perspectives are constructed from our perceptions, creativity, and the continuous learning that allows us to synthesize our experiences into our own constructed realities. These perspectives form our truths, which may not always align with an objective reality but nonetheless shape our interactions and understandings of the world. In this discourse, I explore how positionality—a concept deeply intertwined with intersectionality and privilege—affects our perspectives, particularly in the contexts of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality. Intersectionality, a key theory within feminist thought, posits that these identity facets are inseparable and are embedded within systems of inequality, often rooted in white supremacy, colonialism, and imperialism.

Positionality plays a critical role in critical race theory, which views race as a social construct designed to deconstruct systemic racism. Positionality underscores the unique discrimination faced by minorities in alignment with the third-wave feminist movement's emphasis on these distinctions; in contrast with the second-wave movement, which primarily reflected the views of white, cisgender, middle-class women. The concept of the white savior complex is a critique of actions where well-intentioned white individuals attempt to "save" BIPOC individuals without adequately addressing or understanding the systemic issues at play. This often stems from a lack of cultural awareness and a focus on self-gratification rather than genuine systemic change.

Voluntourism—merging volunteer work with tourism—exemplifies such misdirected efforts. Privileged individuals travel to provide "aid" to those in need, often leaving communities dependent on foreign assistance due to the volunteers' lack of skills and anthropological knowledge to offer long-term, sustainable help. This industry, attracting over ten million participants annually, raises critical questions about the impact and ethics of such engagements.

Engineers Without Borders (EWB) strives to distinguish itself from the voluntourism model through long-term commitment and empowering communities to sustain implemented projects. I do not think that we are inherently

part of the voluntourism issue due to the longitudinal nature and proper equipment of the communities to implement the projects post-completion. Yet, it remains essential for those involved to continuously reassess their contributions and ensure they are fostering positive, sustainable impacts rather than perpetuating dependency; it is important to continuously re-evaluate what it is you are doing for the project, for your peers, and most importantly the communities that you serve. How are you contributing to a net-positive impact rather than voluntourism in these already disadvantaged communities?

To conclude, the exploration of perspective, positionality, and their impacts within the context of community development—particularly through the lens of voluntourism—highlights the intricate balance between intention and impact. Engineering, a field inherently driven by the desire to solve problems and improve lives, offers a unique vantage point to address these challenges. Engineers Without Borders exemplifies how engineering principles can be applied ethically and sustainably, distancing itself from the pitfalls of voluntourism by focusing on empowerment and long-term community engagement.

This alignment with ethical engineering practices underscores the importance of continuous self-reflection and adaptation. Engineers and volunteers alike must critically assess their motivations, actions, and the systemic structures

within which they operate to ensure their work contributes positively to the communities they aim to serve. Through this lens, the concept of engineering transcends its traditional boundaries, embodying a commitment to social justice, equity, and sustainability. By weaving together the threads of engineering and critical theories such as intersectionality and positionality, we are reminded of the power of perspective in shaping solutions that are not only innovative but are also inclusive and respectful of the complexities of human experience.

In this way, the dialogue around voluntourism, positionality, and engineering becomes more than an academic exercise; it evolves into a call to action for those in the field of engineering and beyond. It challenges us to redefine success, not by the completion of a project but by the sustainable and empowering impact it has on the communities we serve. As we navigate the intricate landscape of global community development, let us carry forward the lessons of perspective and positionality, ensuring they inform our approaches, actions, and aspirations towards creating a more equitable and just world.